



# Galeano's country

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“**More than an alliance, it is a brotherhood**”. So spoke the newly-elected president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, during his first trip as president to Cuba at the end of April. The visit included a five-hour meeting with 86 year old Fidel Castro. The Cubans were assured that the strategic alliance with Venezuela was firm with both presidents signing 51 agreements worth USD1 billion. Such reassurances are important for the Caribbean island because Venezuela, besides being its top trading partner, subsidises Cuba by some USD3.5 billion a year, providing it with an estimated 115,000 barrels of oil a day. There was a time when the common phrase in Cuba was “sin azúcar no hay Cuba” (without sugar there is no Cuba”); today I would suggest “sin Venezuela no hay Cuba” would be nearer the mark.

The subject of oil arose again on the first leg of the Venezuelan president's regional tour in May when he travelled to Uruguay, after which he went on to Argentina and then Brazil. President Maduro assured his Uruguayan counterpart, José Mujica, that he could expect a permanent supply of petroleum. Agreements on transport as well as food exports were signed and President Maduro declared that the 19th century had been one of division, followed by imperial dominance in the 20th century; this century, however, “is the century of liberation and unity, that is why we are here”.

His delegation occupied three full floors of one of Montevideo's main hotels and included over a hundred bodyguards. Five aircraft flew the president and his entourage from Caracas. During his short stay he also met with former president Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010) who was Uruguay's first left-wing leader and might easily regain the presidency in the October elections next year. It was during his tenure that diplomatic ties with Cuba were restored. Doubtless he had much to discuss with Nicolás Maduro and with whom there surely was a strong sense of shared brotherhood as well. Not just Tabaré Vázquez, but the current Uruguayan president, who spoke at Chávez's burial, had a close personal relationship with the late Hugo Chávez.

I have written about Uruguay before (The Land of Oxo – Issue 194, March 2009) whose tempestuous past has had a great influence on the writer Eduardo Hughes Galeano, a native of the country. He once said that the walls are the publishers of the poor, but for those with pesos in their pockets, there are plenty of books to choose from by this prodigious author. I mentioned him briefly in last month's column when I referred to his book, “Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina” (Open Veins of Latin America), and to understand what motivates him requires some appreciation of his country's history.

Uruguay is located on the south-eastern coast of the South American continent and is today overshadowed by the adjacent republics of Brazil and Argentina which, along with the British, posed a military threat in the 19th century. Before that, both the Spanish and the Portuguese fought over the country during which control changed hands several times. Although peace eventually came to Galeano's country and it became the continent's most egalitarian society, there was a spell of dictatorship between 1973-1984.

It may not be a large South American country (closer to the size of Florida in the United States of America) although writing in 1999 the Uruguayan author reminded us in one of his numerous articles that it had five times more land than Holland with five times fewer inhabitants and added, “We have more cultivable land than Japan, and a population 40 times smaller”.

Uruguay has strong ties to the United Kingdom, France and Italy and today is known for its progressive society, political stability and advanced social legislation. The economy continued to expand last year – the third year of President Mujica's term – but at a pace

slower than in 2011. Gross Domestic Product grew by 3.5%, although inflation stood at 8.3%. Unemployment was around 6.7% and exports continued to increase – mainly due to the higher price of soy. Its USD51 billion economy is only a 300th of the size of the US's, but the investment-grade country has experienced a decade of prosperity helped significantly by prudent economic policies; besides soya, new sectors have also been developed such as timber and cellulose.

President Mujica, who is 78 years old, has been described as a maverick; certainly, the word “conventional” does not fit his personality. Known as Pepe, he is a former leftist guerrilla who spent 14 years in jail during the 1970s for being a leader of the Tupamaro guerrilla group; for more than a decade he was held in solitary confinement. But it would be wrong to assume that this background automatically guarantees his unmitigated support (despite any promises of perpetual petroleum) for President Maduro. This realist, in fact, has let it be known that if the Venezuelan president wishes to be Chávez the results will be abject failure.

In the case of relations with Brazil and Argentina, it would appear that Uruguay wants to integrate more with Brazil than with Argentina. One ambition is to achieve a new cargo railway link with Brazil which he sees as a wonderful market “on our doorstep” for his country’s beef, lamb and dairy products. President Mujica wants his country, unlike Argentina, to dedicate more effort to maintaining stability and investor security. In 2012, Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner placed restrictions on imports from Uruguay as part of a clampdown on capital flight; the introduction of currency controls also posed a threat to Argentine tourism in Uruguay.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”. These lines of W.B. Yeats come from his poem “The Second Coming” and remind us of Macondo, the fictional town in the book, “One Hundred Years of Solitude”, written by Gabriel de la Concordia García Márquez, whom I also mentioned in last month’s column. Macondo prospered but then fell to pieces, and now, whether the comparison is too harsh or not, Argentina has been likened to it. The very first Latin Letter in December 2002

(Issue 132) was about Argentina and was entitled, “Land of Sorrow”. But whatever his neighbour’s fate may be, Uruguay’s president is determined to avoid the fictional town’s fate.

President Mujica (who cannot run again for the presidency) lives in a humble tin-roofed house which he shares with his wife, who was also a Tupamaro guerrilla and is now a senator. He has simple wants and says that people should only work to live and not the reverse, which is a belief shared by most Latin Americans. While Nicolás Maduro describes Barack Obama as “grand chief of devils”, José Mujica feels that the president is the best US politics can produce and believes that they can achieve common ground (talks between them are expected later this year).

Like the Colombian author’s “One Hundred Years of Solitude”, Joseph Conrad’s “Nostromo” is set in South America. Conrad was a Polish-born novelist who lived in England and was buried there at Canterbury in 1924. He was famous for his African novel, “The Heart of Darkness”, about the former Belgian Congo which, like “Nostromo”, reflects upon imperialism and colonialism. “Nostromo” is the European equivalent of Márquez’s condemnation of his continent’s mistreatment, only this time absent fantasy allusions, the story is told through the eyes of a narrator who is a sailor, a framing device which Conrad often used in other stories (nostromo in Italian means “sailor”).

If the Venezuelan president is living his life through the pages of “Las Venas Abiertas de América Latina”, which has the sub-title: “Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent”, his Uruguayan counterpart is certainly not; he is more concerned about tomorrow than the pillage of the past.

Let us hope that more Latin American presidents can emulate José Mujica by understanding and learning from history but concentrating their minds on the future. Galeano’s condemning book was once famously handed to President Obama by the late Hugo Chávez; I think that the US president, along with European leaders, should be given a copy of “Nostromo”. Time to forget open veins; let’s have open minds, but with an appreciation of what went before.

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